

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

Paper No ASQEC/20/12

ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE

4 June 2020

Agenda Item 9

INSTITUTIONAL RE-APPROVAL: SOUTHERN REGIONAL COLLEGE (SRC)

COVER SHEET

To receive the report for the Institutional Re-approval of SRC and to endorse the recommendation for continuing approval and Recognition under Ordinance XXVIII.

INSTITUTIONAL RE-APPROVAL REPORT: SOUTHERN REGIONAL COLLEGE

1. INTRODUCTION

On 30 September 2019 Southern Regional College (SRC) submitted an IA2 Form requesting that they be considered for institutional re-approval as a collaborative partner of the University. An Institutional Re-approval Document (IRD), with supporting documentation, was received on 6 February 2020. Based on an initial assessment of the relationship with SRC over the current period of approval, Quality Enhancement (QE) recommended that a desk-based review be undertaken. The Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic) approved this recommendation.

The report details the findings from the desk-based review.

2. BACKGROUND

Formed in 2007 from the former Armagh College of Further Education, Upper Bann Institute and Newry and Kilkeel Institute SRC is the largest Further and Higher Education College outside Belfast. SRC serves the needs of the wider community across Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and the South Down and South Armagh regions of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. The College has six campuses located in Newry, Armagh, Banbridge, Lurgan, Portadown and Kilkeel. However, HE is currently offered on five of the six sites with no HE provision based on the Kilkeel campus.

SRC currently has 1054 students (317 full-time and 728 part-time) studying on 15 programmes approved by Ulster University. In 2018/19 SRC was allocated a total MASn of 555 full-time HE places and recruited a total of 478 full-time HE students. The College also collaborates with Queen's University, John Moore's University, Liverpool, Dundalk Institute and the Open University. SRC has ambitions to increase the range of full Honours degree programmes over the next 5 years. A recent institutional review process has led to 2 new Foundation degree being validated by the Open University and there are ongoing discussions with Dundalk Institute.

3. VISION, MISSION AND CORE VALUES

The long-term vision of the Colleges is based on the desire to provide relevant and meaningful vocational learning opportunities delivered through quality and innovative teaching, which is informed by effective quality improvement planning. The vision of the College is:

‘Further Education in Northern Ireland will produce world- class skills and support to business that transforms lives’

This vision complements the strategic aim for the sector as laid down in the Department’s “Further Education Means Success” strategy and is further amplified through the College Mission Statement, which articulates what this means to individual learners:

‘Further Education Colleges positively change people’s lives by providing high quality, accessible and relevant skills, education and training which tackles disadvantage and drives economic growth.’

The Mission of the College is ‘to transform lives through meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences’.

A series of underpinning core values have been developed which will help define the culture of the College, the internal processes and external relationships, as well as the interaction between staff and learners. The core values are:

- Putting learners first
- Collaboration: Working together to achieve more
- Striving for excellence

4. GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

SRC is a Non-Departmental Public Body within the budget responsibility and ambit of DfE and is an incorporated body whose legal status derives from the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

The Governing Body is responsible for the ongoing strategic direction of the College. The Chief Executive of SRC and the Executive Team are responsible for the operational management of the College. The Governing Body is supported by a number of Committees, including the Staffing Committee, Finance and General Purposes Committee, Education Committee and Audit Committee. The Terms of Reference and membership of these Committees were included within the IRD.

With regard to the management structure for higher education within SRC the Curriculum Area Managers (CAMs) and the Head of Quality and Pedagogy (Higher Education) report to the Assistant Director Curriculum (Higher Education and Quality) who in turn reports to the Director of Curriculum. The Director of Curriculum is a member of the Senior Management Team.

5. FINANCE

For the 2019/20 academic year SRC received £28.57 from DfE. The financial year ended 31 July 2019 showed an operating deficit for the year of £2.09m.

The College has total net assets of £41.69m at 31 July 2019 (£53.66 at July 2018).

SRC financial statements are prepared in line with the Statement of Recommended Practice (SORP): Accounting for Further and Higher Education and in accordance with Financial Reporting Standards (FRS 102).

6. STANDARDS ASSURANCE AND QUALITY MANAGEMENT

SRC's HE provision was subject to a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Quality Review Visit in April 2018. The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at SRC:

- There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK;
- There can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.

There is an external examiner in place for all programmes approved by Ulster University which are delivered and assessed at SRC. The FPM, with support from subject experts within the Faculty, monitors the academic standard and quality of all Ulster approved programmes offered within the College.

External examiners confirm that the moderation and assessment processes in place within the College operate effectively to ensure the standard of the award on offer. Course Directors respond to the external examiner report and share the report, and the course team response, with students at Staff/ Student Consultative Committee (SSCC) meetings and via the virtual learning environment. Course Directors respond directly to issues raised by the FPM.

SRC has a Higher Education Coordinators' Forum which meets 3 times a year. The aim of the Forum is to promote and cascade good practice in the following areas:

- Academic standards and the quality of the student performance (KPI) in order to inform improvement
- Policies and procedures to ensure consumer protection obligations and student protection measures are implemented, inclusive of public information
- Updates to HEI, AO and PRSB requirements
- The involvement and the quality of the Higher Education student experience
- Self-evaluation and quality improvement planning
- Enhancements to promote employability, and business and industry culture

The Education Committee is authorised by the Governing Body to oversee college curricular provision, especially the nature, quality and performance of

the provision. A key responsibility of the Committee is to review and monitor the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning.

A Higher Education Advisory Board was established in SRC in May 2015 to ensure its Higher Education curriculum provision meets or exceeds the UK threshold standards for the qualification as set out in the FHEQ. The Board also ensure that programmes are aligned to the UK Quality Code for HE and meet the requirements of all its HEI, AO and PRSB responsibilities. The Board is chaired by the Assistant Director for Higher Education and Quality (ADHEQ).

All Ulster University higher education programmes have a designated HE Course Coordinator. A Lead Coordinator is appointed to ensure standardisation of the learning experience where a course is delivered on multiple campuses. The CAM is the nominated Quality Assurance Manager for a selection of HE subject specific programmes in the designated academic school. Both the CAM and HE Course Coordinator receive regular AO updates and are provided with ongoing CPD in all aspects of HE and AO quality assurance processes. Ongoing training ensures that staff are competent in meeting and delivering the necessary rigour required to maintain academic standards as set out by the AOs for programme approval, delivery, assessment and internal moderation. All HE programmes maintain an electronic course folder to retain all programme course information. This folder is audited by school managers and supported by Q&P. Q&P also publish and provide training to all HE staff on AO and HE assessment guidance material. Staff from Ulster University regularly participate and lead in these training sessions.

The College has in place an annual self-evaluation process that requires all subject disciplines to produce an annual self-evaluation report (SER) and quality improvement plan. This is the main method used by SRC to identify areas for improvement and put in place changes to ensure the quality of the student academic experience. The self-evaluation review process is complemented by a number of internal college quality assurance initiatives such as the bi-annual online student survey, staff student consultative committee meetings (SSCC), DHoS focus groups and implementation of the retention toolkit. Throughout the year academic course teams review and compose SERs with assistance from a dedicated Curriculum Area Manager. Each HE programme SER is scrutinised by the HoF through the SER process.

As part of the University's new Continuous Assurance of Quality Enhancement (CAQE), all SERs at SRC are presented and reviewed by the Quality and Pedagogy Unit. HE Course Coordinators submit an evidence pack comprising of an annual course review document, an algorithm template, the EE reports and course team responses. This process provides senior management with the opportunity for a robust challenge on content and quality of submission in advance of the formal response from Ulster University regarding the review of key performance indicators for each of the College's Foundation degrees and Access programmes. As part of the CAQE process SERs are not forwarded routinely to Ulster University but are available to the FPM if requested.

If a programme has not achieved the threshold standards for Ulster University, the HE Course Coordinator must agree an action plan for submission to Ulster to address under performance in relation to retention and achievement. The CAQE must be submitted and signed off by the FPM and Associate Dean (Education). No major areas of concern were noted in the 2018/19 review.

SSSC meetings are held at least once per semester. The minutes of these meetings feed into Course Committee (CC) meetings. A copy of the minutes of the SSSC and CC meetings are sent on an ongoing basis to the FPM. No area of concern has been identified.

The HE Co-ordinator at SRC attends, and actively participates in, meetings of the Collaborative Partnership Forum (CPF). An HE Co-ordinators report is provided for each meeting of the CPF.

7. STUDENT SUPPORT AND THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

SRC has an Admissions Policy in place which was last updated in November 2018. All full-time and part-time students on substantive courses (120 hours or more) are normally required to attend a Pre-Enrolment Advice Session (PEAS) with a specialist tutor prior to taking up a position on a course. This support process provides applicants with an opportunity to discuss their choice of course and to ensure that they are satisfied with the requirements of the course.

SRC has recently launched a new Learner Management System (LMS) for processing all HE course applications in November 2020. Students seeking entry for the 2020/21 academic year will be able to apply online via the College website.

SRC has a Learning Support Team consisting of 6 Learning Support Co-ordinators, 80 Learning Support Assistants, mentors and note takers providing a range of support interventions to students with learning difficulties and/ or disabilities.

All students undertake a comprehensive induction programme. Course specific induction is supported by additional information about the campus, staff, location of classes and college life. Student feedback rates highly the induction provided. SRC provided a copy of the induction programme for the FdSc Computing with their IRD.

Once enrolled onto a programme the student is allocated a Personal Tutor. The Personal Tutor has the key responsibility of pastoral care of their students, and developing a positive, constructive relationship to support them to achieve. The tutorial programme at SRC provides learning guidance and support and is provided by a key member of each course team. The role of the Personal Tutor includes pastoral support, academic support and guidance, career development and progression, student discipline, safeguarding and support opportunities for student feedback.

The HE Handbook, which is provided to all students at induction, provides details on the academic appeals process, student complaints procedures and the College Grievance Policy. HE students are also advised that they have the right to engage with the Competitions and Marketing Authority if they believe the College has operated in breach of Consumer Protection Law. These areas are also covered in detail at induction.

All students have an opportunity to provide feedback on teaching, learning and assessment through:

- Student Focus Group meetings – Three class Student Focus group meetings take place each academic year with the HE Course Coordinator. The agenda for each meeting and guidelines are published through QIU and disseminated to all programme teams. Feedback is evaluated in programme course committee meetings and informs the SER document. Responses are provided back to the student cohort in the next Student Focus Group meeting.
- Personal Tutorial – All HE students are allocated a personal tutor who provide individual tailored support to each student.
- Student survey – SRC gets the views of students through the online QDP survey to support its self-evaluation arrangements. The survey covers areas such as admissions and enrolment, induction, teaching and learning, tests and assessments, well-being, quality assurance, and careers advice. Survey data is shared with faculty management and course teams and is used to self-evaluate in POS and Faculty SERs. In the 2018/19 academic year 989 SRC HE students participated in an online QDP Student Survey with a response rate of 73%. The results of this survey were externally benchmarked against 93 other HE providers with a total of 510,149 UK learners surveyed. Student responses indicate a positive experience in the College with the teaching and learning questions demonstrating an overall satisfaction rating of 90%. Feedback received is implemented and the published survey is then released to all students through Moodle.

The Review of all survey results is a standing agenda item in Student Focus Group meetings, course committee meetings and is fully evaluated in the programme SER. Results from surveys are reported at class, programme, faculty and college level. Overall College data is used by the curriculum directorate to inform improvement planning for the student academic experience.

The Student Union is made up of elected Officers who represent students at both a campus and whole college level. Students have the opportunity to nominate for the role of HE Officer and run for election. HE Officers work with the local and regional Student Unions to provide a voice for the wider student agenda in HE. Every May, the Student Activities Team oversee the election of a Student Governor. A Student Governor is an individual student from the College who is elected each year by their peers to sit on Governing Body meetings.

SRC Careers Teams supports both students wishing to progress in or into Higher Education and those who want to start their careers. During the 2018/19 academic year SRC introduced Unifrog learner destination software to allow students to compare every university course in the UK and in 30 countries across the world.

Both the external examiners and the FPM confirm that the student support mechanisms in place within SRC are excellent.

8. STAFF RESOURCES

SRC has a Recruitment and Selection Policy and Procedures in place which was last updated in April 2017. The policy applies to all permanent and temporary posts within the College. All new full-time and part-time HE teaching staff complete a comprehensive two-stage induction programme.

The College has an Employee Development Policy which applies to all employees at SRC. An Employee Development Committee develops and monitors the annual employee development plan. The Employee Development Unit manages the implementation of the plan.

9. LEARNING RESOURCES

SRC has an Information and Learning Strategy (2018-2020). The overarching principle of the strategy is that it supports the College's goal for excellence in teaching and learning by providing learning opportunities and developing curriculum personalisation to meet the needs of learners. The ILT strategy includes the use of an infrastructure to support all aspects of teaching and learning, including management of the learning environment and business systems that support and enable learning and assessment.

IT Services and Teaching and Learning Advisers (TLAs) with IT skills work with course teams in mapping e-learning materials to individual course modules/units on an ongoing basis to help lecturers with the integration of ILT into their learning programmes.

SRC has a Learning Resource Centre and Library Policy and Procedures which sets out in detail the support available in the LRCs and access arrangements. There is an LRC or Library at each campus where HE programmes are delivered. LRC staff ensure that all users can easily access learning resources both electronically and non-electronically by providing 24/7 access to resources through the College's Virtual Learning Environment. Library induction is provided. Library usage is monitored by the College to inform opening hours.

A number of new technological developments have recently been introduced in SRC including the development of the EBSCO Discovery App. Students can now access the wide range of EBSCO E-books via the app 24/7, on their mobile or tablet. Further procurement of e-resources within the LRC's include the JSTOR e-Journals package purchased specifically for students studying the Ulster approved Associate Bachelor's Degree in English and History.

Other online databases available to Higher Education students, include Passport Euromonitor, an award-winning global market research database providing strategic analysis on industries, countries, and consumers and companies. The resource has been used as an effective research tool by HE students from Computing, Engineering and Business Studies programmes. The Geospatial Data Service has been uploaded onto Moodle and promoted on social media to all relevant lecturing staff. This resource provides access to a wide range of digital mapping products to support teaching and learning.

10. PUBLISHED INFORMATION

SRC provided a copy of their Communications Policy and their Communications Procedural Note. The Marketing Team is responsible for co-ordinating, publishing, and ensuring the accuracy of published information.

FPMs confirm that they receive draft information from SRC for approval prior to the material being made public. Staff use the template provided by the University for approving such material.

11. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The review of documentation provided by SRC, together with the University's ongoing monitoring and review processes, provide broad confidence that, at an institutional level, the College has effective policies and procedures in place to meet the University's standards assurance and quality management requirements.

The University is satisfied that SRC has the capacity to retain responsibility for the aspects of delivery, monitoring and management of programmes devolved to them.

The College is asked to review the Complaints Policy to ensure that students are made aware that they have a final right of appeal to the University.

RECOMMENDATION: that a Memorandum of Recognition be signed for a period of 5 years (2019/20 – 2023/24).